


The Multigroup Model of Identity Leadership (Multi-IL) in professional team sports: Navigating group dynamics from the perspective of professional soccer head coaches

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines how subgroups and multigroup dynamics within professional soccer clubs influence the head coach's leadership effectiveness from a social identity perspective.

Design and method: In this qualitative study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 professional head coaches from the top four German men's leagues and the top two women's leagues. Data were analyzed using qualitative structuring content analysis and iterative abductive coding, integrating both deductive and inductive approaches, grounded in critical realism.

Results: The findings reveal that head coaches in professional soccer clubs operate within three key subgroups: the player group, the staff group, and the management group. Head coaches play a bridging role, unifying these subgroups as their interactions can have both positive and negative effects on their leadership effectiveness. Positive leadership experiences were characterized by functional and effective relationships (*alliances*) with at least two and often all three subgroups. In contrast, functional alliances with just one subgroup, even if it was the player group, proved insufficient and led to negative leadership experiences over time. Positive leadership experiences depended on the head coach's ability to manage the social identity dynamics within and across subgroups, as negative dynamics in any subgroup could undermine overall leadership effectiveness. These findings have been synthesized into the *Multigroup Model of Identity Leadership (Multi-IL) in professional team sports*.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of considering key subgroups and their interplay for effective identity leadership. Coaches and researchers should adopt a multigroup perspective to enhance leadership effectiveness and advance leadership research.

1. Introduction

Carlo Ancelotti is one of soccer's most successful coaches, having achieved a record number of five Champions League titles. However, his tenure as head coach of Real Madrid in the 2014/2015 season demonstrates that off-pitch dynamics can significantly affect a coach's ability to lead effectively. Despite winning the Champions League the previous season and having the support of key players, Ancelotti was dismissed in 2015 (Rogers, 2015). He later revealed that conflicts with President Florentino Perez over certain players and training "killed" their relationship (Volcano, 2017). This example illustrates that professional

soccer clubs are complex social systems in which the head coach (in England: manager) plays a vital role in connecting different social subgroups, for example, the players, the staff (e.g., assistant coaches), and the management—and underlines the need to look beyond the coach and the players. These nested subgroups may hold their own norms and values while sharing overarching ideals and a collective desire for club success, with potential implications for a coach's leadership effectiveness.

According to the *Social Identity Approach (SIA)* (Haslam, Fransen, et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2015), which serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, every group has its own social identity. This identity

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comprises a specific set of implicit and explicit norms, values, and ideals that play a vital role in the group's functioning. The SIA explains how group identification (i.e., the feeling of oneness with or belongingness to a group) influences perception, emotion, and behavior of group members, ultimately responsible for positive and negative group dynamics. In fact, recent research has demonstrated that SIA is especially useful to understand human behavior in the sports context (Haslam, Fransen, et al., 2020; Rees et al., 2015).

Building on this foundation, the *Social Identity Approach to Leadership* (SIA-L; Haslam et al., 2020) emphasizes a leader's role in cultivating a shared social identity among group members to gain influence and lead their team as a cohesive unit. Leadership is thereby seen as a group process, with a leader's influence stemming from their ability to represent, promote, create, and embed a shared identity—the four dimensions of identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014). Research in sports shows that coaches who actively engage in identity leadership enhance a number of health and performance outcomes—such as less burnout and higher self-rated health (Butalia et al., 2025; Fransen, McEwan, & Sarkar, 2020) as well as improved individual (Krug et al., 2021) and team performance (Fransen et al., 2015; Krug et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2018)—all mediated by the identification with the team (see Steffens et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2021 for an overview).

However, previous research has primarily focused on the relationship between head coaches and players, neglecting other relevant groups within professional sports organizations (Peachey et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Carlo Ancelotti's story serves as a powerful reminder that various social groups, such as the management, can affect the coach's ability to lead effectively. Beyond formal groups, informal subgroups—formed by factors like tenure, roles, shared values, or experiences (McGuire et al., 2021)—are not only inevitable but can significantly influence team identity and cohesion, which in turn is likely to impact coach leadership as well (Martin et al., 2015, 2016; McGuire et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017).

Despite compelling anecdotes, the influence of nested subgroups and multigroup dynamics remains underexplored in empirical research, with qualitative SIA-L studies being particularly scarce. To address this gap, our qualitative study seeks to advance SIA-L by systematically examining how multiple, coexisting subgroups and their interactions shape leadership effectiveness. We conducted semi-structured interviews to understand head coaches' perspectives on the social dynamics within and between relevant subgroups of professional soccer clubs and their impact on the coaches' capacity to lead effectively. The findings of our research are integrated into the *Multigroup Model of Identity Leadership* (Multi-IL) in professional team sports.

1.1. Theoretical lens: Social Identity Approach to Leadership

As the example of Ancelotti highlights, leadership is not solely about the leader. It is about leaders acting in a social context, such as a specific soccer club with its own norms, values, and ideals. Within this context, different groups may interpret leadership behavior in different ways, depending on their specific identities and expectations (Haslam et al., 2020). According to the *Social Identity Theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and the *Self-categorization Theory* (Turner et al., 1987), people have the capacity to define themselves in a given situation as *I* but also as *We*, depending on individual and contextual factors. This means that part of one's self-concept is not only defined by individual characteristics but by group affiliations and the ideals and “pictures” associated with them (i.e., a *social identity*). When activated (i.e., salient), a social identity influences perception, emotion, and behavior of a person and is the basis for group behavior and social influence (Tajfel, 1982; Turner, 1982, 1991).

If social identities affect people's perception and behavior, they are also crucial for effective leadership. Building on Tajfel and Turner's seminal research around SIA in recent decades, a research group led by

Haslam et al. (2020; Steffens et al., 2014) connected social identity and its related processes to leadership. Based on SIA-L, leadership is the process of developing social influence within a group. More specifically, it is defined as the ability to shape a shared social identity within the group and thus to shape the group's shared reality and the coordinated action of the members. This, in turn, depends on the ability of leaders to be perceived as part of the group and to act on behalf of it (Reicher et al., 2018). According to Haslam and his colleagues (2020), four dimensions are key for identity leadership: being seen as one of the group and representing the ideals of the group (identity prototypicality), acting in the group's interests (identity advancement), creating a shared sense of *us* (identity entrepreneurship), and embedding this identity in structures and practices (identity impresarioship). In sum, effective leadership depends on managing the group and its identity (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2014). Initial research results in sports are promising (Steffens et al., 2020). Engaging in identity leadership as a coach is positively associated with a number of health and performance parameters (Stevens et al., 2024; for an overview see Stevens et al., 2021). This positive impact is driven by stronger group identification (Bruner et al., 2022; Fransen et al., 2014), which is linked to stronger group cohesion (Fransen et al., 2016; Schei et al., 2023) and increased individual (Krug et al., 2021) as well as team performance (Fransen et al., 2015; Krug et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2018).

But people can identify with multiple groups, leading to the incorporation of multiple social identities into their self-concept (Turner, 1985). This is particularly relevant in nested organizations composed of multiple formal groups (Ellemers & Rink, 2005), where different subgroups and their distinct social identities may affect the perception and behavior of group members (Maskor et al., 2023), and thus leadership effectiveness. Coaches and players do not act in a social vacuum. They are part of a club, a dynamic social context that plays a critical role in daily interactions. For instance, players discuss the training, assistant coaches analyze the strategy with leading players, physiotherapists engage with players during treatment, or managers address the media—all of which illustrate the diverse interactions within a professional soccer club. These interactions create a complex, nested social structure in which the coach is supposed to lead the players. This social structure has been a “blind spot” in past leadership research. Scholars have emphasized that neglecting the social context and reducing leadership to a single level of analysis is one of the greatest shortcomings in the field (Cummins et al., 2018; Peachey et al., 2015; Vella et al., 2010).

1.2. The present research

This study aims to advance research on SIA-L by examining different social groups and multigroup processes within nested organizations. Our central research question is as follows: *What role do different subgroups within professional team sports organizations, such as soccer clubs, play in shaping positive and negative identity leadership experiences of head coaches?*

To address this research question, we employed the following approach. First, we identified and analyzed relevant subgroups within soccer clubs from a head coach's perspective (Note: In the sections that follow, *coach* denotes the *head coach*). Based on the typical structure of soccer clubs and informed by the expert knowledge of our soccer specialists in the research team, we initially focused on three subgroups—the player group (i.e., *team*), the staff group (e.g., assistant coaches), and the management group—while allowing coaches to identify any other influential groups. Second, we conducted a comparative analysis of positive and negative leadership experiences to identify key patterns. Third, we examined the type of social influence exerted by each subgroup and its impact on the coach's leadership effectiveness.

The aim of this study is not only to address the research question by describing the qualitative findings but also to analyze how subgroup-specific processes shape leadership effectiveness, ultimately developing a model that reveals underlying mechanisms. Therefore, the

results of this study were synthesized into the *Multi-IL Model*.

2. Methods

2.1. Philosophical underpinnings

This study is grounded in the philosophical perspective of *critical realism* (Bhaskar, 2008), which posits that an objective reality exists independently of our perceptions (i.e., realist ontology). According to critical realism, reality is organized into three layers: the *empirical* (i.e., what we observe), the *actual* (i.e., events that occur, whether or not, they are observed), and the *real* (i.e., the underlying mechanisms, causes, and structures that generate these events). Research in the critical realism tradition focuses on explaining observable phenomena by uncovering underlying structures and mechanisms and connecting the different levels of reality. Thereby, it must be acknowledged that knowledge generation is mediated by theory, context, and previous knowledge—thus, it is inherently fallible and requires ongoing critical (re)analysis (i.e., epistemological relativism; Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002). As a methodological characteristic, critical realists use existing theories not only to derive and embed research questions but also to develop explanatory approaches for qualitative investigation (Fletcher, 2017).

This philosophical perspective informed our methodological and analytical approach. First, SIA-L was chosen as the theoretical frame to gain a better understanding of the influences on leadership dynamics in professional team sport clubs (i.e., complex, nested social systems; Danermark et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2017). Second, semi-structured interviews were selected as the data-collection method and designed to capture coaches' positive and negative identity leadership experiences (i.e., the empirical; Archer et al., 1998; Danermark et al., 2002). Along with the theoretical framework, insights from our soccer experts informed the development of the interview guide, identifying three key subgroups as potential areas of focus: the players, the staff, and the management. Third, we employed structuring qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) that combined theory-informed, deductive coding with flexible, inductive coding in an iterative, abductive cycle (Fletcher, 2017). This approach allowed us to move from participants' own descriptions to the identification of underlying events (i.e., the actual) and mechanisms (i.e., the real). We therefore propose plausible causal explanations for effective leadership and aim to uncover underlying mechanisms, such as identity and (inter)group dynamics, that potentially drive these leadership outcomes. Fourth, we synthesize our results and interpretation into a comprehensive model—rather than merely describing observable phenomena—thereby inviting others to build on or challenge our conclusions.

In sum, critical realism not only guides our methodological and analytical choices but also enables us to explain the interplay among different levels of reality, ultimately contributing to a richer, more actionable understanding of leadership dynamics within professional soccer clubs.

2.2. Context and participants

Using purposive sampling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), this study focuses on soccer coaches from the top four men's leagues (1. Bundesliga, 2. Bundesliga, 3. Liga, and Regionalliga) and the top two women's leagues in Germany (1. & 2. Frauen-Bundesliga). These leagues represent the highest level of professional soccer in Germany. We selected these because coaches work full-time—with few exceptions—and operate within largely comparable club structures. Although the leagues differ in some respects, such as financial resources or media attention, our soccer experts in the research team regarded their organizational frameworks as sufficiently alike to allow meaningful comparisons. Coaching experiences in leagues outside the specified scope, such as amateur or youth leagues, as well as national teams, and any positions

other than head coach, were excluded to ensure comparability. As there were no significant differences in the identity leadership experiences reported by coaches of men's versus women's teams, these results are not presented separately.

In total, 30 coaches participated in the study. At the time of data collection, 20 were actively employed by a club, while the remaining 10 were between positions and seeking new appointments (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics). The participants were contacted directly or through an official request from the German Soccer Coach Association (German: Bund Deutscher Fußball-Lehrer).

2.3. Research design and method

In line with our philosophical underpinnings, a qualitative research approach was chosen, conducting semi-structured interviews and analyzing the data qualitatively supplemented by frequency counts to help structure the findings. Following the ethical standards of the first author's institution, all participants were informed beforehand about the research topic, the research team, the type of data collection and usage, the interview procedure, as well as their right to refuse or withdraw participation at any time.

We conducted semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to pose additional follow-up questions for clarification. The interview guide was designed to explore explicit leadership experiences and derive potential underlying mechanisms related to identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020). Consistent with our critical realist stance, SIA-L as the theoretical frame informed the core questions of the interview, prompting coaches to recount specific experiences that exemplify the key outcome of identity leadership: a strong and shared social identity. The interview guide consisted of three parts (see supplementary material A).

First, the coaches were asked about their general leadership philosophy and behavior to begin the interview and help them ease into the conversation. Next, forming the core of the interview, at least two specific leadership experiences were discussed in detail. The coaches were asked to describe a positive and a negative experience in relation to identity leadership (e.g., "Let's discuss a personal leadership experience: Describe an experience where you were particularly successful in developing a team identity"; "Tell me about a leadership experience when it was difficult for you"). For clarification: The term "(team) identity" is commonly used in German soccer, which facilitated a shared understanding of the concept being investigated. Additionally, we ensured consistency by clarifying that we refer to "a shared understanding among team members regarding the norms, values, and ideals

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of the sample (N = 30).

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Highest League Coached			
1. Bundesliga (Men)	8	–	–
1. Frauen-Bundesliga (Women)	0	–	–
2. Bundesliga (Men)	5	–	–
2. Frauen-Bundesliga (Women)	2	–	–
3. Liga (Men)	5	–	–
Regionalliga (Men)	10	–	–
Gender of Coach (self-identified)			
Men	29	–	–
Women	1	–	–
Non-Binary	–	–	–
Experience as Assistant Coach			
Yes	14	–	–
No	16	–	–
Experience as a Professional Player			
Yes	15	–	–
No	15	–	–
Age (Years)	–	44.00	8.85
Experience as Head Coach (Years)	–	8.70	4.48
No. of Clubs Coached	–	3.34	2.72
Average Time at a Club (Seasons)	–	2.27	1.89

of the group". Drawing from typical soccer club structures and our research team's expertise, we focused on the player (i.e., team), staff, and management group in each leadership experience, while allowing coaches to identify other influential groups. For example, we prompted them with questions such as "How did you lead the soccer players and the staff?" and "Which club individuals, groups, or functions were important for you to lead effectively, and how did you work with them?" The goal was to understand the leadership experience within the specific soccer club in its complexity and over time, rather than focusing on one isolated situation. In the third and final part of the interview, the coaches were invited to reflect on lessons learned and how they might approach situations differently in hindsight (e.g., "What would you do differently in retrospect?").

2.4. Data analysis

We recorded approximately 34 h of interview material, with the interviews lasting an average of 67 min ($SD = 17$ min). We used the software MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 for transcription, anonymization as well as data and code management; all coding and interpretation were conducted by the research team. For the analysis, we employed a structuring qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2000). In doing so, we combined theory-informed deductive coding with flexible, inductive coding in an iterative, abductive process—continuously moving back and forth between theory and data (Danermark et al., 2002; Fletcher, 2017). Similar approaches have been effectively employed in comparable studies (e.g., Faris & Parry, 2011). In the end, the coding scheme included three types of codes: 1) structural, 2) social, and 3) content codes (see supplementary material B for code examples). By employing these three types of codes, we conducted at least a triple coding cycle for each interview, ensuring comprehensive and iterative refinement of our analysis.

Structural codes were applied deductively and used as filters, categorizing interview sections, such as general leadership philosophy (Interview Part I), specific positive or negative leadership experiences (Interview Part II), or lessons learned (Interview Part III). The codes for positive and negative leadership experiences were derived from SIA-L, meaning text passages indicating whether a shared social identity among group members was established (or not), as well as any other passages directly relevant to the described leadership experience, were identified and highlighted (Haslam et al., 2020). For the purpose of this study, only structural codes related to positive and negative leadership experiences (Interview Part II) were included in the analysis.

Social codes identified relevant subgroups or individuals mentioned by the coach and were used as filters as well. We initially coded key subgroups known to be relevant within the club, such as the player group, the staff group, and the management group. In an iterative process, these codes were validated and expanded with additional insights from the data, particularly regarding other critical subgroups or informal microgroups as well as individual roles (e.g., leading players, team councils, assistant coaches, or externals such as media).

Content codes captured the substantive content of each interview passage, detailing what was being described in each leadership situation. These codes were always assigned alongside a structural code and, when relevant, a social code. For example, we used content codes to indicate whether the coach described a functional or dysfunctional relationship with a subgroup (*alliance*). Some content codes were coded deductively, for example, positive or negative social influence behavior of subgroups, whereas others emerged inductively, for example the type of group alliances (see supplementary material B for a code overview).

In line with our critical realist perspective, the codes were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, interpreting illustrative quotes and quantifying code frequencies to show how often a topic was mentioned. To ensure rigor and research quality, we maintained a detailed audit trail through MAXQDA to document analytical decisions, fostering both traceability and transparency (Fletcher, 2017).

Furthermore, we adhered to other qualitative practices, including detailed memo writing after each interview (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019) and comprehensive code memos (Kuckartz, 2014; Mayring, 2000). We also engaged in ongoing critical reanalysis both within our diverse research team—which included social psychologists, sports psychologists, and soccer experts—and with other researchers at our institute. One such discussion led us to recognize and code the emerging pattern of *alliances*, reflecting how subgroup relationship-building shapes shared identity. This process ensured that multiple perspectives informed our analysis, acknowledging that knowledge generation is inherently influenced by theory, context, and prior knowledge (Archer et al., 1998; Bhaskar, 2008; Danermark et al., 2002). Additionally, we discussed the results with one study participant and one additional soccer coach who did not participate in the interviews. This process provided an opportunity to check whether our interpretations were meaningful to practitioners, rather than reflecting merely an academic point of view (Mayring, 2002).

3. Results

In the following section, we begin with our qualitative findings by identifying the subgroups most relevant to coaches' leadership. Next, we contrast positive and negative leadership experiences. Finally, we examine how each subgroup exerts social influence on the coach–player relationship and report how frequently social influence behaviors occurred across participants.

3.1. Key subgroups and the coach as connector

Three internal social subgroups were found to be relevant for the coaches' leadership effectiveness: the player group, the staff group, and the management group. Within these broader subgroups, key individuals—such as leading players, assistant coaches, and the sports director or manager—as well as additional microgroups (e.g., the team council) that were nested within these subgroups played a significant role. The coach occupied a unique position within the club, being part of all three groups and at the same time serving as the main connector among them (see Fig. 1). Importantly, although the coach is not formally a member of, for example, the player group, it was about seeing oneself as a part of the group. This, in turn, was recognized by the team (i.e., being seen as one of us) and ultimately fostered leadership.

I became bolder and more authentic—truly feeling part of the [player] group—and because of that my players followed me much more closely. We weren't just buddies; they genuinely believed in what we were doing, embraced my guidance in both tactics and spirit, and appreciated that closeness. (Participant 24)

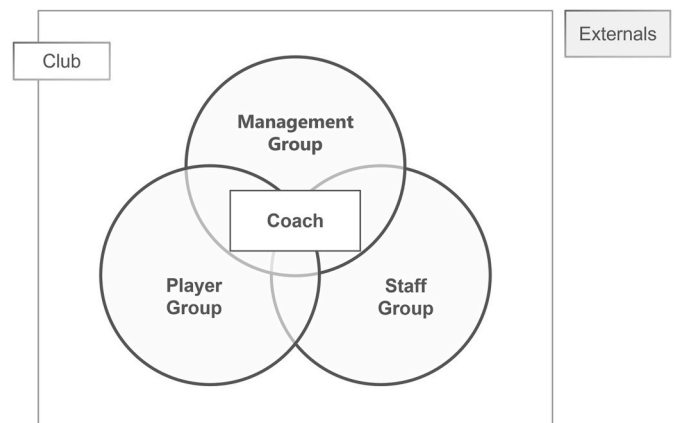


Fig. 1. Visualization of the coach's position within professional soccer clubs.

Effective identity leadership required a delicate balance between being perceived as an integral member of each group while simultaneously serving as a connector among various organizational subgroups. This was challenging and not immediately apparent to the coaches, with its true significance often becoming clear only in retrospect. For example, one coach recalled:

There was a chairman of the supervisory board who criticized my team. In response, I defended my team. [...] Naturally, this led to the development of resentments [between us]. [On the other hand] it created an incredible sense of unity between our team, the coaching staff, the players, and the people around the team. [...] But everyone outside of this circle, [...] all the others [e.g., the chairman] felt left out. (Participant 17)

Additionally, in higher leagues, a fourth external group, comprising the fans and media, emerged as influential. Particularly in the top men's leagues, this group was identified as important but predominantly associated with a negative influence on the coaches' work, often questioning the coach's ability in case of poor results. However, given our focus on intra-club relationships, the fan and media subgroup was not examined further.

3.2. Comparison of positive and negative leadership experiences: alliances make or break

The data revealed that positive and negative leadership experiences differed significantly in the nature and impact of *alliances* formed between the coach and the subgroups. These were classified as either *functional* or *dysfunctional* based on the coach's descriptions. A *functional alliance* is defined as a positive and effective relationship between the coach and the subgroup (e.g., functional alliance with the staff: "The coaching team was completely loyal" (Participant 23)). Conversely, a *dysfunctional alliance* refers to a relationship that was perceived as negative or ineffective (see supplementary material B for code details).

In total, the coaches described 65 leadership experiences, with 35 being perceived as positive and 30 as negative. For consistency, only experiences in which at least all three subgroups—the players, the staff, and the management—were explicitly discussed were included in the following analyses ($N_{total} = 46$, $n_{pos} = 29$, $n_{neg} = 17$).

In 79 % of the positive experiences, coaches reported functional alliances with all three subgroups, indicating effective overall collaboration. In the remaining 21 %, at least two of the three potential alliances were functional. Notably, in higher leagues, it was essential that one of the two functional alliances was with the management group. Whether the second alliance was with the player group, or the staff group did not matter. Crucially, there was not one positive leadership experience reported with only one alliance being functional, not even if that functional alliance was with the players. Over time, negative influences from the other subgroups eventually turned the experience negative.

In negative leadership experiences, coaches reported no functional alliance in 18 % of the cases, one functional alliance in 47 %, and two functional alliances in 35 % of the cases. When two alliances were functional, the outcomes were evenly split: 50 % resulted in a positive leadership experience, while 50 % were negative. These results, together with the results of positive leadership experiences, indicate that a coach needs at least two functional alliances to have a chance to turn it into a positive leadership experience.

3.3. Social influence behavior with substantial impact on the coach-player alliance

In a third analysis, we examined how various social influence behaviors of the different subgroups (e.g., active support or bad-mouthing) shaped the alliance between the players and the coach. We begin by describing and interpreting the types of social influence each subgroup exerted and conclude by comparing the frequency of these behaviors in

positive and negative leadership experiences. By pairing our rich qualitative descriptions with frequency counts of positive and negative social influence behaviors, we remain aligned with our critical realist stance—highlighting both the depth of individual experiences and the consistency of these patterns across participants.

3.3.1. Player group: enablers and underminers of the coach's influence

In the following, we analyze qualitative examples of positive and negative influence behaviors for each subgroup. Beginning with the player group, key figures, and microgroups such as leading players and the team council were identified as playing crucial roles in shaping coaches' leadership experiences, both positively and negatively.

Leading players exerted a direct positive influence on the alliance with the coach by actively supporting the coach's decisions within the team. Furthermore, it was reported that leading players often resolved internal team issues in line with the coach's perspective: "The boys handled many of the problems themselves with the older players, with the team council and the captains. They solved a lot internally" (Participant 20). Consequently, many of the coaches actively involved them. In some cases, they informed them about decisions in advance or sought their feedback. Additionally, leading players supported the coach's identity leadership by strengthening the team's social identity, for example, by integrating new players and explaining to them what is important for the team.

I came when the team was in the regional league [Regionalliga, 4th League], and I was fired when we were in the second highest league [2. Bundesliga]. There were a lot of guys who had already been in the regional league, and they understood: 'Okay, we have to play a certain kind of soccer, which may not always be pretty, but it's successful [...]'. They transported this to the new joiners, who brought better quality. That was a wonderful symbiosis. (Participant 23)

Negative influence behaviors by players mainly occurred when the leading players did not support the coach or when there was a lack of leaders within the team: "After we played 0-0 in the first game, they [the older players] were the first to question whether this was the right approach. That's counterproductive because you realize that the younger players will jump on it" (Participant 11). Another coach mentioned that without the leading players the identity failed to manifest: "Without the two key players, the rest of the women's team sat quietly in the locker room—it was as if suddenly nobody was calling the shots" (Participant 08). In this context, coaches often highlighted the importance of the team's composition. Many emphasized that having a clear hierarchy or "axis" in the team is crucial to preventing negative influences and fostering positive dynamics: "For me, the main reason was that we lost the hierarchy within the team and too many new guys came in who went in a different direction. That didn't work out." (Participant 23).

3.3.2. Staff group: supporters and saboteurs of the coach's leadership position

Depending on the league, participants reported that beyond assistant coaches, roles like athletic coaches, analysts, physiotherapists, and doctors were considered as an important part of the staff. However, assistant coaches were seen as particularly crucial to the coach's leadership effectiveness. In higher leagues, coaches often brought their own coaching team (e.g., assistant coaches) to shape group dynamics and manage this subgroup's identity to their advantage, reducing the risk of dysfunctional alliances.

The staff, particularly the assistant coaches, influenced the coach's leadership effectiveness positively both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, they supported the coach by presenting a united front and demonstrating their alignment with the coach to the team. They also had a direct influence by interacting with the players, passing on important information to the coach, and actively working on joint solutions:

My assistant coach, he's been coaching here for four years. [...] For me, that's the optimal solution, because he hears a lot from the team and then passes on not everything, but nearly everything to me, allowing me to effectively influence certain processes. (Participant 04)

While less frequent, there were instances where assistant coaches negatively affected the coach-player alliance and, consequently, the coach's leadership effectiveness. Through direct actions such as "bad-mouthing" or indirect influence acts such as ignoring instructions, the coach's perception within the players was negatively affected.

I didn't notice this at the beginning. I just noticed that the mood was getting worse and worse, [...] in the coaching team, in the whole team, among the players. For example, [...] [he, the assistant coach] went down [after a meeting] and told the guys directly: 'do you know what the coach said?' [...] Then, during a meeting, he would take out his mobile phone: [so as if he was saying] 'I'm not interested in what you guys are talking about'. And this leads to the fact that the work [...] and the development can never be optimal. (Participant 14)

3.3.3. Management group: strategic sponsors and challengers of the coach's leadership

In higher leagues, the management's role became increasingly important. This group's influence on the coach-player alliance was frequently mentioned, both positively and negatively, and was considered highly impactful. Forming an alliance with the management group in higher leagues was cited as one of the most critical yet challenging aspects.

The positive impact of the management was evident in public statements in favor of the coach and active cooperation. For instance, a participant explained:

The sports director learns about issues from the advisor and then hears from a business perspective, so to speak, what is going on with the player. And that's why it's so important that the coach and the sports director keep checking in. So that you can act on it at an early stage. (Participant 03)

Additionally, the consistent translation of the team's identity into the club's structure and processes supported the coach's identity leadership. Some clubs were performing integration measures for new players so that they could learn about the team's and the club's identity.

However, coaches reported mainly negative influences from the management group, ranging from indirect to direct "attacks". Above all, the lack of cooperation and consultation, especially regarding team

constellation, was frequently highlighted. Since the composition of the team shapes its social identity, it subsequently affects the coach's social influence within the group. The decisions to buy or sell players and thus alter the team's identity were often made without consulting the coach, which weakened the coach's influence:

Another player was sold too, and I was not asked. For a ridiculous amount of money [...]. After that, I knew: 'You can do whatever you want.' The team is weakened. The ones I've developed were taken away. Those who already had established prestige and standing in the team were removed. [...] And I realized that someone wants to get rid of me. (Participant 17)

3.3.4. Frequency analysis and comparison of positive & negative leadership experiences

Overall, the results show that each social group interacted with the player group, affecting the alliance between the coach and the players in both directions.

In positive leadership experiences (left side of Fig. 2), coaches reported mostly positive influence behaviors. Although negative influences were also noted, the overall positive impact of other groups tended to offset them. In contrast, the analysis of negative leadership experiences (right side of Fig. 2) reveals a contrasting pattern. Here, an overwhelming number of negative influences were reported, overshadowing the relatively few positive actions. Coaches frequently faced situations where the negative impact of one or more subgroups significantly disrupted overall group dynamics.

In conclusion, the results illustrate the complex interplay between coaches and various subgroups within professional soccer clubs. They highlight how these interactions shape leadership experiences, emphasizing that effective leadership in nested organizations involves more than managing one group; it requires navigating multiple subgroups and their interactions.

4. Discussion

Carlo Ancelotti's first tenure at Real Madrid in 2014/2015 highlights the challenges even the most successful coaches face in effective leadership. Despite his success and popularity with the players, the management forced him to leave early, showing how complex and demanding leadership can be at the elite level (Rogers, 2015). Ancelotti's situation is not unique. Coaches in professional team sports must navigate complex leadership situations that require more than tactics. While much has been written about leadership, the complexity of socially nested organizations like professional soccer clubs has often been

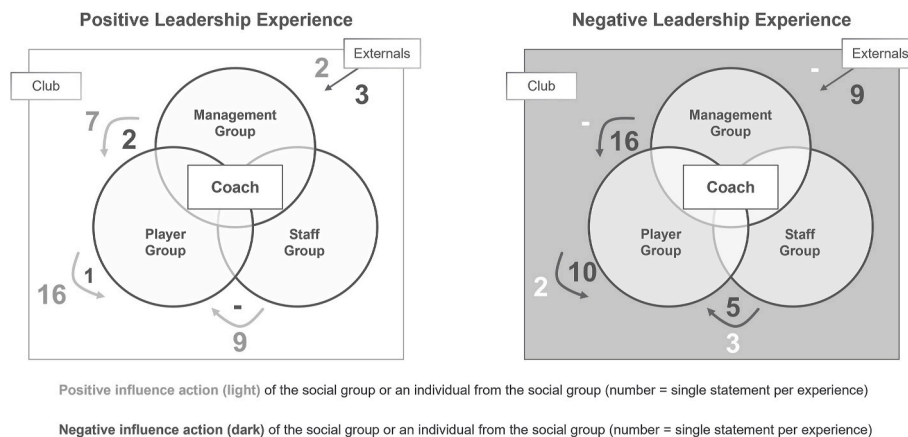


Fig. 2. Social influence behaviors by subgroup in positive & negative leadership experiences.

Note. The figures show the number of positive and negative influence behaviors by each social group. For each leadership experience, only proactive statements were recorded, repeated statements of the same behavior were not counted double. No conclusions can be made about influence behaviors that were not mentioned.

overlooked (Peachey et al., 2015).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore effective leadership by soccer head coaches from a social identity perspective (Haslam, Franssen et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2020). We focused specifically on multigroup dynamics within professional German soccer clubs, examining the role of key social subgroups (i.e., players, staff, and management). This study was guided by critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008), with the aim of revealing and explaining deeper structures, representing dimensions of reality that remain largely beyond the immediate awareness of the coaches. For this purpose, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 professional head coaches from the top men's and women's leagues in Germany, analyzing positive and negative identity leadership experiences.

4.1. The Multi-IL Model

In line with our philosophical perspective, rather than merely describing the phenomenon, our results are synthesized into the Multi-IL Model (see Fig. 3). Three key insights can be drawn: (1) *the coach has a bridging role in unifying social subgroups*, (2) *management of subgroup alliances is key for effective identity leadership*, and (3) *through identity and intergroup leadership, coaches shape positive influence across groups*.

4.1.1. The coach has a bridging role in unifying social subgroups

First, to lead effectively, a coach must go beyond managing the player group (i.e., the *team*) and navigate multiple groups, their identities, and dynamics. In professional soccer clubs, three formal subgroups were confirmed to be critical for the coaches' leadership success: the players, the staff, and the management. Our results highlight that these formal groups constitute the core of the club's identity and are central to the coach's leadership success. We also found that informal microgroups—like leading players and team councils embedded in the three key groups—could strengthen or undermine the coach's leadership by reinforcing or challenging the team's social identity or the coach. Similar microgroup dynamics have been documented in prior studies, which have shown that informal subgroups can significantly influence overall group identity and cohesion (Martin et al., 2015, 2016; McGuire et al., 2021; Wagstaff et al., 2017). Our findings extend previous research on informal microgroups, showing that they also directly impact leadership effectiveness.

Ultimately, effective leadership depends on the coach's ability to

align both formal and informal groups within the club under a cohesive, unifying superordinate identity (Haslam et al., 2003). The Multi-IL Model positions the coach at the center of the club as a social system, highlighting their unique and pivotal role in connecting these social groups and shaping their identities. This role becomes increasingly complex in higher leagues, where external groups such as fans and media gain influence, adding further challenges. As a result, the coach's ability to align with multiple groups and adapt to their dynamics is essential for navigating this multifaceted leadership environment. This insight lies at the heart of the Multi-IL Model: Leadership is a multigroup process that requires coaches to understand their pivotal role in unifying different subgroups.

4.1.2. Management of subgroup alliances is key for effective identity leadership

Second, positive leadership experiences were characterized by functional alliances—positive and effective relationships between the coach and a subgroup—formed with all three subgroups or at least two of them. This finding indicates that the positive influence of two subgroups can offset the challenges posed by one dysfunctional alliance. In contrast, a functional alliance with just one subgroup—whether it was the player group or another subgroup—was not enough to ensure a positive leadership experience. Notably, in higher leagues, it was important that one of the two functional alliances was with the management group.

Research on identity leadership and multigroup prototypicality supports these findings, showing that leaders who are perceived as prototypical (i.e., being seen as *one of us* and representing the ideals of the group) for multiple subgroups tend to have a greater influence across the organization (Steffens et al., 2019). Accordingly, the Multi-IL Model highlights the importance of managing multiple groups and their identities. Our findings further suggest that beyond prototypicality, leaders in nested organizations need to attend to the full spectrum of identity leadership dimensions. Identity advancement (i.e., acting in the group's interests) in a multigroup context, for example, requires balancing protective and empowering behavior across all subgroups (Haslam et al., 2020), ensuring that measures taken for one group do not inadvertently harm or disadvantage alliances with others. Moreover, in this multigroup context, identity entrepreneurship (i.e., creating a shared sense of *us*) goes beyond forming functional alliances with individual subgroups; it necessitates actively developing, evolving, and aligning diverse

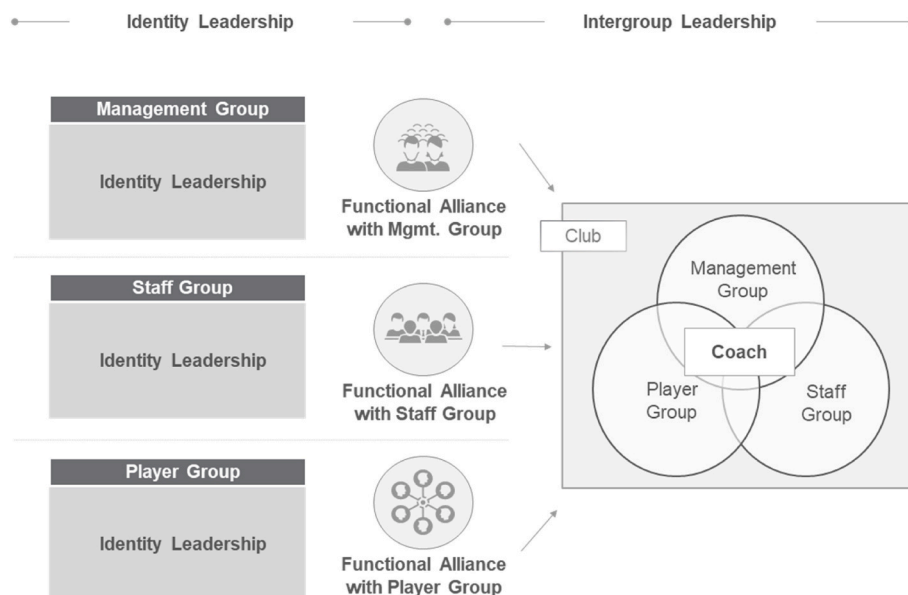


Fig. 3. The Multigroup Model of Identity Leadership (Multi-IL) in professional team sports.

identities under the umbrella of the superordinate club identity (Haslam et al., 2003, 2020). Lastly, coaches play a pivotal role by leveraging identity impresarioship—the deliberate design and implementation of structures, routines, and rituals (Haslam et al., 2020)—to bridge the different subgroup identities.

The findings are integrated into the Multi-IL Model, emphasizing that effective leadership requires managing the identity processes of key subgroups, both within and across them. It depends on the coach's ability to tailor identity leadership to each subgroup, thereby establishing and maintaining functional alliances and social influence within each group, which ultimately enhances overall leadership effectiveness (Haslam et al., 2020).

4.1.3. Through identity and intergroup leadership, coaches shape positive influence across groups

Third, the study revealed that all three subgroups (i.e., players, staff, and management) as well as (informal) microgroups, exerted positive as well as negative social influence behaviors that significantly impacted the coach-player alliance. These behaviors either strengthened or undermined the coach's leadership effectiveness.

Both positive and negative social influence behaviors can be explained by basic social identity processes. Individuals who identify with a group are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors toward their group members, favoring and supporting those they perceive as part of the group. Therefore, supportive acts towards the coach may be based on the perception that the coach is part of the group and highly prototypical (Haslam et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2020).

Beyond these basic social identity processes, additional forms of social influence emerged that supported or undermined various dimensions of identity leadership. For example, positive influence was often focused on fostering the understanding of the club's or team's identity within the team, especially for new joiners (i.e., identity entrepreneurship). In contrast, negative influence behaviors undermined key elements of identity leadership, such as diminishing the coach's perceived identity prototypicality (Haslam et al., 2020). Similar patterns were observed in the behavior of politicians. By questioning their opponents' prototypicality for the group or illustrating how this person devalues, divides, or destroys the social identity, they undermined that person's leadership position and influence within the group (Maskor et al., 2020).

The Multi-IL Model reflects these findings in two ways. On the one hand, it emphasizes the importance of identity leadership within each subgroup. On the other hand, it highlights the need to shape the social dynamics between these subgroups (i.e., *intergroup leadership*). This involves developing shared identities and relationships across groups, establishing ways to collaborate, and defining responsibilities (Hogg, 2023; Hogg et al., 2012). Prototypical representatives of different subgroups, such as leading players or managers, can act as multipliers and serve as "bridges", helping the coach gain and exert influence across multiple groups (Fladerer et al., 2021; Frey, 2015; Hogg et al., 2012). Ultimately, these insights indicate that coaches should continuously monitor both the social identities of each subgroup and the alliance structures, proactively adapt to or align them, and thereby respond effectively to the rapid changes of elite-level soccer.

Overall, our findings extend SIA-L by revealing that effective leadership in nested organizations emerges not simply from the influence of one group, but from the dynamic interplay among multiple, coexisting subgroups. In line with our critical realist perspective, we aimed to uncover latent causal mechanisms that shape leadership experiences. While the above findings clearly illustrate how direct social influence behaviors of different subgroups shape the coach-player alliance, our analysis suggests that many of the behaviors that were reported can be explained by latent social identity (leadership) processes, which coaches and players are not fully aware of. The Multi-IL Model synthesizes these insights by outlining that effective coach leadership depends on the continuous management of alliances through identity and intergroup

leadership to balance and shape intra- and intergroup dynamics.

4.2. Strengths and contributions

This qualitative study advances SIA-L by highlighting how leadership effectiveness in professional team sports results from the interplay of multiple groups. Focusing on the coach, it underlines the need for leaders to adapt strategies in response to evolving social dynamics within and between subgroups. By offering a coach-centered approach, this study makes a significant contribution to identity leadership research in sports, which has so far predominantly focused on the perceptions of followers rather than on leaders (Slater et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it represents a significant step toward a more systemic understanding of leadership, illustrating that effective identity leadership in nested organizations emerges from the complex, interdependent relationships among multiple, coexisting subgroups. This focus addresses a critical research gap and responds to explicit research calls in the field of sports (Cummins et al., 2018; Peachey et al., 2015; Vella et al., 2010).

Additionally, by focusing on the professional sports context in soccer, this study extends identity leadership research to the highest levels of elite sports and provides rare and valuable insights into a broad range of coaching experiences at this level—perspectives that are difficult to access (Stevens et al., 2021).

4.3. Limitations and future research

The elite context of this study provides unique insights into leadership dynamics but also represents a limitation, as strict contractual agreements prevented us from triangulating coaches' perceptions with those of other groups. Further research is needed to explore social interactions among all three groups, incorporating multiple perspectives. Given that similar contractual constraints are likely to affect other researchers as well, future studies should consider examining these social interactions in other elite sports settings, such as handball, hockey, or European basketball, where different access conditions might provide additional insights.

Further research could benefit from our critical realist stance by combining systematic observation with abductive and retroductive reasoning (Bhaskar, 2008). For instance, video-based coding of training sessions and matches could surface recurring patterns of functional and dysfunctional alliances among players, staff, and management (e.g., Erickson & Côté, 2016; Erickson et al., 2011); these observations would then inform hypotheses about the underlying events and mechanisms. Alternative methods, such as social network analyses could offer further insights into intergroup dynamics—along the lines of Bruner et al. (2022)—where one would map how formal and informal alliances form, dissolve, and reshape subgroup influence over time, analyzing their impact on the coach's leadership effectiveness.

In addition, quantitative or mixed-method, longitudinal designs would complement these qualitative approaches. For example, a season-long study—similar to Mellano et al. (2022)—might track identity leadership behavior, team and subgroup identification, performance metrics (e.g., win-loss records, goal differences, distance covered), as well as subjective dependent variables like well-being indicators (e.g., burnout, self-rated health), status of alliances (e.g., functional vs. dysfunctional), and social influence behaviors. By collecting these data from players, coaching staff, and management over time, researchers can triangulate perspectives, identify causal links, and deepen our understanding of how nested subgroup dynamics shape leadership effectiveness.

Based on our findings, it may be valuable to consider how identity leadership can be assessed across multiple subgroups. Expanding on the concept of leader's multiple identity prototypicality—the extent to which a leader embodies the defining characteristics of multiple subjectively relevant groups (Steffens et al., 2019)—this idea can be applied

to the four dimensions of identity leadership as proposed in the Identity Leadership Inventory (Steffens et al., 2014). For instance, future assessments could examine the extent to which a coach: (1) embodies what the *respective subgroups* stand for, (2) acts as a champion for these subgroups, (3) fosters a sense of cohesion within them, and (4) establishes structures that are meaningful and functional for each group. Alternatively, the focus could lie on assessing the leader's ability to bridge and integrate diverse subgroup identities (Fladerer et al., 2021). For example, items might evaluate how effectively a leader understands and manages the unique values and norms of different subgroups and fosters an overarching shared identity that unifies them (e.g., based on theoretical work by Hogg et al., 2012). These approaches could provide a more comprehensive assessment of identity leadership efforts in contexts with multiple, coexisting identities.

While we believe the core principles of the Multi-IL Model are broadly applicable, our empirical grounding is specific to professional soccer clubs. Future research should adapt or extend the model to other sports or organizational contexts and explicitly explore the different dimensions of identity leadership in multigroup settings, such as identity impresariopship. Further research is needed to investigate how leaders can create effective structures to bridge identities within nested organizations and to clarify how and why subgroup-bridging structures become effective across diverse organizational and cultural conditions.

Additionally, it would be valuable to examine potential gender differences in leadership dynamics and social identity processes. Although our study did not reveal significant differences, this may be due to the limited number of coaches who identified as women in our sample. Furthermore, future studies should explore how external stakeholders—such as fans and media—interact with and influence internal subgroup dynamics, given their potential to shape leadership outcomes in elite sports.

4.4. Practical implications

Based on our findings, several practical implications can be drawn for coaches and leaders in general. Coaches should pay attention to all subgroups, both when choosing a club and regarding their leadership actions. Leadership is not just about managing the players; a coach must also foster strong alliances with other groups, such as the staff, and management. The goal is to build a cohesive social structure where all three alliances work together under the shared “identity umbrella” of the soccer club. This ensures that social groups positively influence each other and support the coach and their leadership. Thus, coaches should aim to engage in identity leadership with a focus on spanning boundaries between subgroups (Fladerer et al., 2021; Hogg et al., 2012).

It is critical that coaches do not fall into the “identity trap”, becoming overly preoccupied with their own individual identity rather than embracing the collective identity of the group (Haslam et al., 2022). As our study indicates, effective identity leadership requires a delicate balance: the coach must be perceived as part of all internal subgroups while acting as a connector among them. This dual positioning maximizes their influence. Although coaches often employ identity leadership instinctively, they risk attributing outcomes solely to their own qualities, remaining unaware of the crucial role of group identity dynamics (Haslam et al., 2022).

In light of these insights, our findings underline the importance of leadership development programs designed to train coaches in identity leadership. These programs should equip leaders with the skills to reflect on, construct, and recalibrate multiple subgroup identities so that they align with a cohesive club identity. Initial leadership development programs on identity leadership have been successfully tested for business and sports leaders (Fransen, Haslam, et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2023; Mertens et al., 2021). Our findings particularly underscore the relevance of the ASPIRe model by Haslam et al. (2003), which outlines a multi-phase process whereby leaders initially identify and leverage subgroup identity resources before integrating these into a cohesive,

superordinate identity. Based on our findings, we propose that coaches should start by analyzing subgroup identities. The strength and quality of alliances can serve as indicators of existing shared social identities. Notably, even if a club boasts a long-standing tradition suggesting a strong social identity, it is essential to review internal alliances and subgroup dynamics since internal realities often do not match external expectations. Traditional clubs frequently face this problem as the identity that fans expect often diverges from the lived experiences of internal subgroups. When a unified club identity is lacking, our findings indicate that, depending on the league, prioritizing the management group may be advisable, as they set the strategic vision and allocate resources to shape the superordinate club identity.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how subgroup dynamics within professional soccer clubs—as nested organizations—shape head coaches' leadership effectiveness. Through semi-structured interviews, the study uncovered novel insights into the complex dynamics of these subgroups and their influence on effective identity leadership at the elite level of soccer. Social identity processes played a crucial role not only within the player group but also within and between the staff group and the management group. Social influence behaviors from all subgroups could both support and challenge the coach's leadership, highlighting the complexities of leadership in such environments. The resulting Multi-IL Model demonstrates that effective leadership in complex social contexts depends on continuously aligning diverse subgroup identities and managing intergroup dynamics to establish functioning alliances. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for a multigroup perspective in leadership research and practice, particularly in nested organizations with multiple coexisting subgroups.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Verena C. Pearce: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Martin P. Fladerer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Thorsten Leber:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Dieter Frey:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Hans-Dieter Hermann:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2025.102972>.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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